

RUSSIA MONITOR

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INSTITUTE

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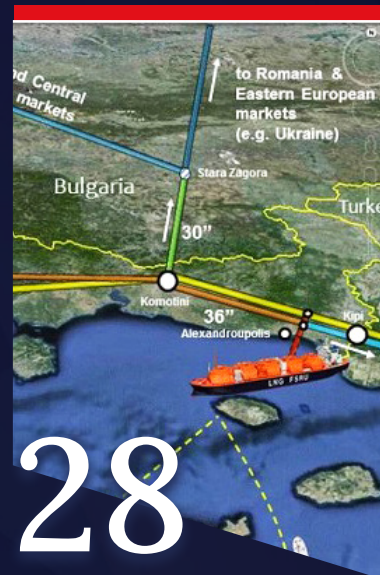
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SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

12 August 2020

RUSSIA WON IN BELARUS

What might seem is that Alexander Lukashenko will make a successful bid to stay in power, though an overwhelming majority of Belarusians are visibly fed up with him as the leader. Certainly, Lukashenko's rigged victory and violent crackdowns would not keep him in power if it were not for Russia's stance. The Kremlin believes that it is best to see Lukashenko stay in power, yet his ratings have never been so weak for a quarter of century.

Russian President Vladimir Putin on August 10 congratulated Alexander Lukashenko on his re-election as Belarusian president shortly after the regime had thwarted the first wave of social unrest against rigged presidential election. Putin's congratulatory message to Lukashenko on his re-election was orbital around efforts to deepen Russian-

Belarusian ties within the Eurasian Economic Community and the Commonwealth of Independent States, as well as build up military and political cooperation within the Collective Security Treaty Organization. Russia's foreign ministry also had warm words. Its message to Lukashenko contained an implicit urge to advance integration efforts between these two

states. “Belarusian state authorities prevented the situation from escalating dangerously,” Russia’s diplomats said whilst commenting on violent crackdowns on the first wave of protests. In the statement, Russia’s top diplomats referred to when Belarusian law enforcement had detained 33 mercenaries from the private Russian military contractor Wagner Group, dubbing it a “provocation staged by third countries.” Just a glimpse into an August 7 phone call between Lukashenko and Putin is enough to understand this might confirm their deal having been sealed before the election. What followed were alleged reports that Ukraine was behind sending Wagner Group mercenaries to Belarus to set Moscow and Minsk at loggerheads. But clearly, Lukashenko is showing his gratefulness to the Kremlin. It is difficult to label otherwise his accusing the EU and NATO of sustaining opposition protests. Lukashenko said these were orchestrated by Poland and the Czech Republic, with whom Russia has been embroiled in a political and propaganda war. Also on the agenda is Lithuania. The more so that this is where Belarusian opposition presidential

candidate Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya who is the real winner in the whole presidential runoff has fled.

Recent days have shown that the Kremlin had decided not to replace somewhat recalcitrant Lukashenko as this simply would not pay off. Moscow’s plan is simple: to weaken Lukashenko as much as it can and get out of his head any ideas to diversify Belarus’s foreign and energy policies, notably in Minsk’s recent thaw in ties with the United States. Heavy repression is yet another blow to Lukashenko’s image in the West. What could be on the table are new Western sanctions to isolate the Belarusian leader on the international arena, which could push him to return to the path of close cooperation with Moscow under far worse conditions both for him and Minsk’s independence. Weak, alone, and with powerful opposition whilst no longer supported by the Belarusians, Lukashenko will have to fulfill Moscow’s orders: sell the country’s strategic business to Putin-endorsed oligarchs, build Russian military bases in Belarus, and agree to deploy a number of troops and military hardware.

17 August 2020

RUSSIA’S FAST-TRACK COVID-19 VACCINE POSES BIG RISK

As Russian President Vladimir Putin declared during a conference with government members (August 11), the country had won the global race and produced the world’s first coronavirus vaccine. The Russian leader said the vaccine had passed all the required checks and his daughter had already been given it. Many scientists worldwide, also in Russia, have doubts about this, though. The Russian-made vaccine failed to go through adequate procedures. But in the whole story, more is about Russia’s prestige around the globe rather than public health.



SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

Russia has successfully developed the world's first coronavirus vaccine and plans to launch a nationwide vaccination campaign in October. The news came during the president's videoconference with government members. Some countries have shown interest in Sputnik V as the Russian vaccine was named with the Philippines and Vietnam planning to start trialling the drug. Why did Russia opt for such a peculiar name? Russia's aggressive push for developing the Covid-19 vaccine was a political matter of prestige, and not that of the health of people in Russia and across the globe. For Moscow, there was the top goal: to be the world's number one at all costs. In doing so, Russian hackers were reported to have tried to steal coronavirus vaccine research from foreign scientists.

But the Russian-developed vaccine involves a grave risk. Russia had approved it before it underwent clinical trials. Phase III studies that require thousands of volunteers have not

been performed. Yet less than 100 people had officially received the inoculation against the epidemic and its widespread use could be dangerous, the Association of Clinical Trials Organizations said in a letter. Thus, the new drug passed just Phase I whilst trials performed so far did not abide by global standards. Roughly 10 percent of all clinical trials proved successful. Moscow sees any doubts over its new vaccine as a political attack. Russia's Health Minister Mikhail Murashko dismissed mounting international concern over the safety of its vaccine developed at the Nikolay Gamaleya Research Institute of Epidemiology and Microbiology as completely groundless.

As he argued, foreign states were sensing the specific competitive advantages of the Russian vaccine. The health minister on August 12 said some doctors would be vaccinated within two weeks. Russia's Health Ministry added the vaccine would confer up to two years of immunity to the virus that causes Covid-19.



SOURCE: ROSGVARD.RU

17 August 2020

SCARED LUKASHENKO, A RISK FOR RUSSIA

Just two days after the presidential vote in Belarus, the Kremlin saw its best-scenario of a landslide victory of weak Alexander Lukashenko nearly happening. Yet large-scale protests that swept throughout the country were a bitter surprise for both Minsk and the Kremlin. A week past the presidential election, Vladimir Putin has a tough nut to crack: to support Lukashenko or to leave him on its own. The longer the Kremlin takes to make its final decision, the greater is the risk that Russian officials will no longer control what is now taking place across Belarus.

But this weekend's two phone calls (on August 15 and 16) between the two leaders mark great nerves both in Minsk and Moscow.

The Belarusian leader has no other choice. He might try to stay in power by forceful solutions but to do so, he needs Russia's support and help

from Vladimir Putin. Lukashenko is playing anti-Western tones, looking for some help from its eastern neighbor. In his speeches, he pointed finger to Western countries, notably Poland and Lithuania, for destabilizing the situation in Belarus whilst claiming NATO massing on the country's border.

To make the whole thing look far more credible, he ordered large-scale military drills on Belarus' borders with Lithuania to take place between August 17 and 20 in the western region of Grodno, off the country's new nuclear power plant in Astravyets. The location is no coincidence, though. The Russian-built nuclear facility has in the past sparked outrage in Lithuania. In doing so, Lukashenko has sent a signal to Moscow: he is the sole person to shield Russia's influence and interests in Belarus whilst any revolution might be detrimental to them both, militarily and politically. Possibly by deploying military units, officials seek to cover steps to dispatch troops to take down rallies or decide the insertion of the Russian army

to Belarus to support Lukashenko. Whilst in the first phone call between the two leaders (August 15), Russia reiterated its support for Belarus, it was not decisive as the following day, Vladimir Putin said Moscow might respond in line with the provisions envisaged in the Collective Security Treaty, a military bloc that includes both Belarus and Russia, to defend the country "legal authorities." Of course, the question is whether it would pay off for Moscow to push for a direct forceful solution. This would be tantamount to a fresh batch of Western sanctions and a bigger-than-ever wave of anti-Russian sentiments among the Belarusians. Thus, the Kremlin will stick to nothing but mere declarations.

Perhaps Lukashenko will bring Putin into a stalemate with a staged provocation. Thus Russia might be cooking up some emergency scenarios, including the one with Lukashenko being toppled or removed from office and Moscow trying to own the aftermath.

19 August 2020

LUKOIL REDUCES HYDROCARBON OUTPUT

In the first six months of 2020, Lukoil, a Russian top energy producer, said its crude oil figures fell by 3.2 percent and recorded the fall of 14.7 percent in natural gas production. The cut was due to the new OPEC+ agreement and a decrease in gas supply from Uzbekistan to China both driven by a negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on hydrocarbon demand.

What is to be blamed for the company's poor performance in the first six months of 2020 are its Q2 2020 figures as compared to those recorded in Q2 2019. Between April and June, Lukoil had hydrocarbon output

numbers lower by 14.9 percent than in the January-March period. Throughout the second quarter, the firm's oil production, excluding the West Qurna 2 project in Iraq, totaled an average of around 1.981 million barrels of



SOURCE: ROSGVARD.RU

crude oil equivalent. In the first half of the year, hydrocarbon production dropped year-on-year by 8.4 percent, to 2.155 million barrels per day (bpd). Output cuts arose from the new OPEC+ deal and a drop in gas supply from Uzbekistan to China. The OPEC+ cut deal came into effect on May 1, 2020, with throughput limitations being imposed onto Lukoil's crude quotas in Russia as well as for some of its hydrocarbon projects abroad. The company's Q2 2020 crude refining dropped by 10.1 percent, to 19.88 million, on the quarter notably in Russia (-12.2 percent) and abroad, albeit slightly (-7.9 percent). Also,

a drop in Lukoil's throughput emerged from reduced hydrocarbon demand in China a vital market for the giant's gas projects in Uzbekistan. Lukoil's gas output totaled 6.396 billion cubic meters, or bcm, in Q2 2020, down 24 percent on the quarter. Here, there is also a gap between the firm's projects at home and abroad. But unlike for crude throughput, Lukoil saw its gas figures abroad drop sharply, down 44.2 percent to 2.091 bcm whilst roughly 7.7 percent at home, to 4.305 bcm. In the six months of 2020, gas output averaged 14.808 bcm, down 14.7 percent year-on-year.

21 August 2020

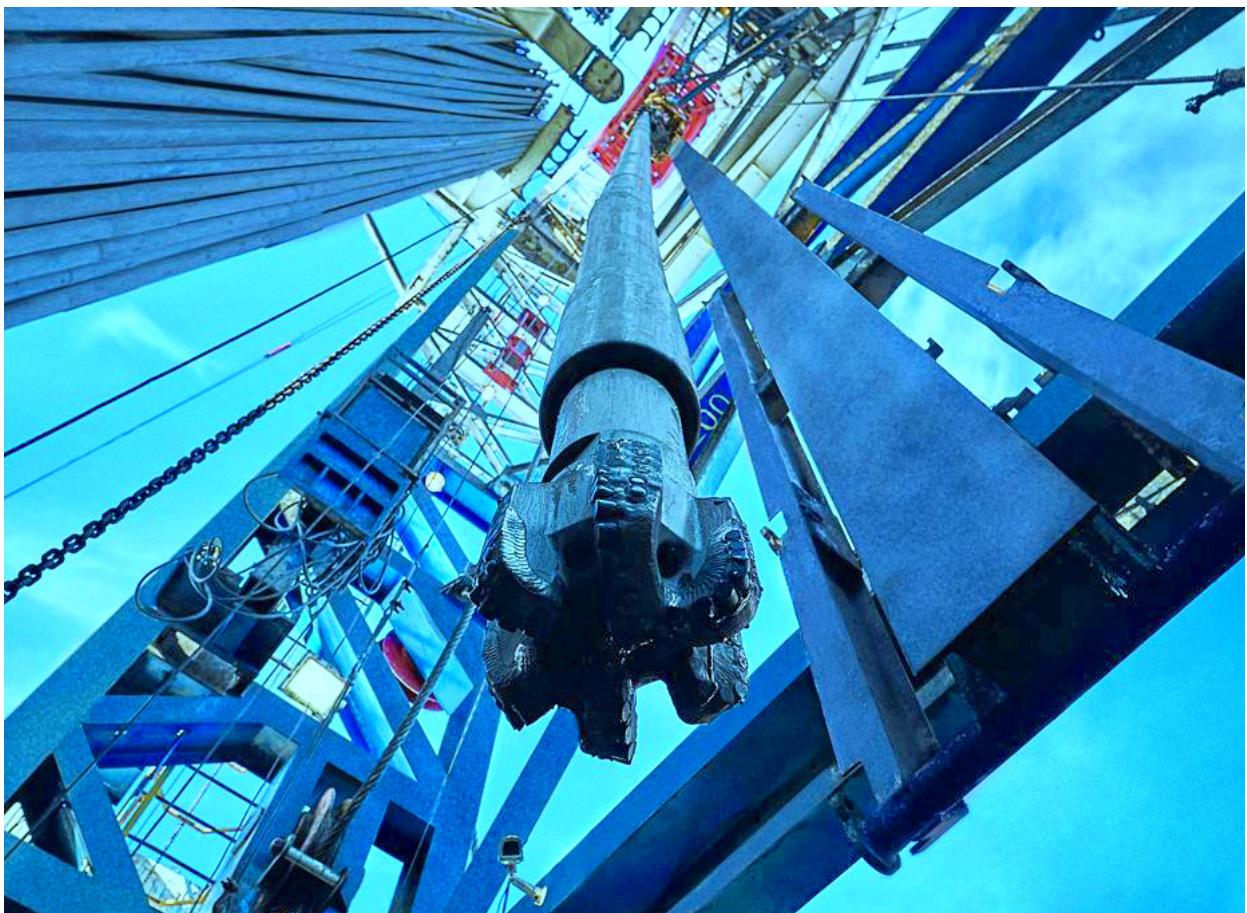
RUSSIA BECOMES WORLD'S SECOND-LARGEST OIL PRODUCER

The United States retained its leadership in oil output worldwide, the Joint Oil Data Initiative (JODI) said in a new update. Russia won the second place whilst Saudi Arabia came third. As for both oil output and processing, in June, Russia saw a slight change month-on-month. The U.S. oil production and processing numbers rose far more than in Russia. Yet all these three recorded a decline in their respective export figures. Thus, Russia solidified its advantage over Saudi Arabia, although both are top members of the OPEC+ oil cut deal.

In June 2020, the U.S. raised its oil output by 9 percent on the month, to 10.897 million barrels per day (bpd). Also then, Russian crude production went down by 0.17 percent, or 15,000 barrels, month-on-month, to 8.376 million bpd. In a far worse position, Saudi

Arabia slashed output by 11.8 percent in June 2020 a month before, this figure stood at 7.484 million bpd. Exports got a far more severe blow they fell 17.3 percent from the month before to 4.98 million barrels per day. In June, the U.S. had its export dropped by 5.9 percent, to

SOURCE: GAZPROM-NEFT.COM



2.756 million bpd. The JODI does not publish monthly export figures for Russia, but these are believed to have fallen, too. The previous-month tendency seems to have remained stable. Russia is reported to have exported 4.532 million bpd in May, and 5.345 million bpd in April. As for crude throughput in June, both U.S. and Russian refineries remarked an upward

trend, quite contrarily to Saudi Arabia. U.S. refineries recorded a 7 percent slump to 13.866 million bpd compared to May. Russia saw a rather modest increase of 0.3 percent in crude throughput on the month (5.109 million bpd). Saudi's domestic crude refinery throughput fell 4.5 percent month-on-month to 1.842 million bpd in June.

22 August 2020

ATTACK ON NAVALNY: POISON THE SERVICE OF THE KREMLIN

With the suspected poisoning of Alexei Navalny, the Kremlin sets on a tighter course in its domestic policy as both Kremlin officials and the chekists are keen to perpetrate any crime to stay in power. Why has Navalny been targeted only now? And why like that? With this, the Kremlin seeks to intimidate opposition leaders more than with frequent arrests of the notable Russian opposition figure. Likewise, Russian officials care little about what other countries might say as Navalny is a famous figure worldwide. If anyone ever thought his wide popularity would somehow shield him against the Kremlin's revenge, they would be mistaken, though. The timing is not accidental: the attempted poisoning occurred while a wave of public unrest is sweeping throughout neighboring Belarus.

Navalny started feeling unwell before losing consciousness while on a return flight to Moscow from the Siberian city of Tomsk. The Russian opposition leader was taken to a hospital after the plane made an emergency landing in Omsk. Doctors told reporters on Friday that Navalny was in grave, yet stable condition. Also on Friday, after an hours-long delay, the medical staff informed Navalny suffered from a severe metabolic disease. There is no doubt that Russian officials are playing for time, waiting before any traces of

poison are undetectable in Navalny's blood before the opposition leader is allowed to be evacuated to Europe. Moscow's response leaves no doubt that someone made an attempt on Navalny's health and life. Who made the decision and poisoned the opposition leader remains obscure. What is little known is whether the goal was to assassinate Navalny or cause irrecoverable harm to his health to push him out of public life for long, like was the case of another opposition activist, Vladimir Kara-Murza. The timing was important, too,



SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

as Belarus is now seeing a wave of large-scale rallies, a likely prelude to a “color revolution.” The Kremlin decided to send a strong signal to the country’s opposition, Russia, and the whole world that Putin is determined to keep power. Any theories on the incident being staged by the Russian opposition or a faction seeking to discredit Putin were nothing but fake news. Even if Vladimir Putin did not issue the order himself, he certainly did not mind

his subordinate doing so as demonstrated by earlier attacks: the killing of Boris Nemtsov and attempted murder of Sergey Skripal. After the constitutional overhaul and the vote whose results revealed a decline in Putin’s popularity, the regime has no choice but to toughen repression and stage what it did against Navalny to show that even prominent opposition figures have no safe haven.



22 August 2020

MAJOR OIL COMPANIES COMPLAIN TO PUTIN ABOUT GOVERNMENT TAX HIKES

Major Russian oil producers balk at an idea of an increase in the profit-added tax, according to what Deputy Chief Executive Officer of Gazpromneft Alexei Yankevich said during a videoconference. While speaking about the Finance Ministry's proposal, he said a relevant paper had been signed, with the whole issue being submitted to the Kremlin. Both Gazpromneft and Rosneft could suffer most from the new changes in the profit-added tax for hydrocarbon fields.



SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

Also, the CEO of Rosneft was the initiator of a letter that the country's biggest oil firms sent to the Russian leader. Major oil producers submitted the letter to President Vladimir Putin to complain about the Finance Ministry's scheme to change the profit-based tax. The letter was signed by CEOs of Rosneft (Igor Sechin), Lukoil, (Vagit Alekperov), Gazpromneft (Alexander Dyukov), Tatneft (Nail Maganov), and Zarubezhneft (Sergey Kudryashov). According to the Russian business daily Kommersant which is believed to favor Gazprom the president put a resolution on the letter to Deputy Prime Minister Yuri Borisov "to consider and submit proposals." Borisov is in charge of the energy sector. Why did the Kremlin get the letter? It came as a response to the draft law of the Finance Ministry that provides for

a change in the profit-based levy. With these updates in force, an extra 200 billion roubles would be transferred to the federal budget within the next three years. The ministry is looking to close the budget gap. According to ministry officials, there was a 213 billion-rouble decline in budget revenue in profit-tax liabilities from what was earlier assumed. Starting in 2019, oil and gas companies carrying out exploration and development activities on depleting hydrocarbon deposits in some areas have been subject to a new income-based tax. The Russian finance ministry has presented the government with plans to raise tax rates from hydrocarbon production. It seeks to prevent losses of the tax base by more than 50 percent for transferring historical losses; in the past, this was possible even by 100 percent. Also, for the second group of fields normally, there are four of them the ministry suggested an update to the mineral extraction tax, or MET, that is now included in the profit-based tax, making the whole tax burden heavier than now. The changes would generate additional revenue of 87.8 billion roubles in 2021 and 55.6 billion roubles in 2022, the ministry added. Those that might suffer most could be Gazpromneft and Rosneft whose oilfields belong to the second tax group alongside a field run by Surgutneftegaz. The joint move of Russia's oil majors should be all the more appreciated as Sechin and Dyukov managed to gain support from other firms, also private ones. Oil majors are likely to impede government plans. Igor Sechin enjoys an enormous influence in the Kremlin and is amongst Putin's closest people the Russian leader prefers meeting him in person rather than via a videoconference. Their latest face-to-face meeting took place on August 18.



24 August 2020

RUSSIA ANXIOUS OVER TURKEY'S GAS DISCOVERY: WILL GAZPROM LOSE SALES MARKET?

For a couple of years, Turkey has made strides to diversify its gas imports – by curbing Russian-sourced supply, buying gas from Azerbaijan, and importing growing volumes of liquefied natural gas. But Ankara has the ambition to secure energy self-sufficiency, thus no wonder Turkey has been pitting a rising offshore oil rivalry, and the latest gas discovery in the Black Sea has sparked a wave of euphoria in the nation.



SOURCE: BOTAS.GOV.TR

Turkey's drilling ship Fatih has been operating since late July in an exploration zone known as Tuna-1, about 150 kilometers north of the Turkish coast. In a televised address to the nation, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has announced its discovery of large natural gas reserves off the Black Sea coast that paves the country's way for energy independence. The Turkish president said the new gas field contains 320 billion cubic meters (bcm) of natural gas and could start producing by 2023. It could take seven to 10 years to start production and involve investment costs at between \$2 billion and \$3 billion. Also, Erdogan made a reference to a heated maritime feud over gas deposits in the eastern Mediterranean, just off Cyprus. Saying this will be yet another source of gas for Turkey, the Turkish leader indirectly corroborated the country's tough

stance in this matter. Turkey's whopping energy discovery has filled Russia with considerable consternation. Yet optimistic moods prevail in Moscow, with local energy companies believing Turkey will not quit buying piped gas from Russia. Many in Moscow say that it is yet little known to what extent Turkey will reap economic benefits from making the deposit exploitable. Some Russian experts close to the Kremlin argue that with a drop in oil and gas prices, it is far more profitable to import energy commodities from already existing fields rather than to develop new ones. A more detailed geological survey might prove that the deposits hold far less gas than initially believed, according to Russian energy experts.

Russia's anxiety is understandable as a major Turkish-Russian gas supply deal is set to expire by 2021. Under the 25-year energy contract, Turkey is obliged to purchase certain volumes of Russian gas. In 2017, 52 percent of Turkish gas imports came from Russia, compared to roughly 33 percent in 2019. Turkey is now reliant on gas supplies yet less and less on Russian-sourced energy, with Azeri gas pushing aside Russian piped natural gas delivered through the Blue Stream and TurkStream pipelines beneath the Black Sea. Throughout the six months of 2020, Russia sent 2.7 bcm of natural gas to Turkey, an amount that covered 25 percent of the country's total demand. Running from Azerbaijan via Georgia to Turkey, the South Caucasus Pipeline merges with the Trans-Anatolian Gas Pipeline, or TANAP, on Turkish soil and occupies a vital role in Ankara's efforts to cut energy dependence on Russia. During March and April 2020, Azerbaijan surpassed Russia in delivering natural gas supplies to Turkey.



SOURCE: GAZPROM-NEFT.COM

25 August 2020

RUSSIAN BUDGET GETS FEWER PETRORROUBLES

The share of oil and gas revenues in Russia fell below one-third throughout the first six months of 2020, reaching a low figure in the past few years, the Russian Audit Chamber wrote in a federal budget report.

“The country’s oil and gas revenues accounted for 29.3 percent of the whole federal budget, marking a 13.9 percent drop on the year,” the document reads. What do “oil and gas revenues” stand for? According to the country’s finance ministry, these are mineral extraction tax revenues for oil and gas output, energy export

duties, as well as profit-based hydrocarbon levy that refers to some deposits. Starting from 2005, the share of oil and gas revenues in the Russian federal budget ranged between 36 and 51 percent. Russia’s finance ministry saw its projected drop in the ensuing years yet not at this pace. Under the three-year federal budget

act, more than a third of oil and gas revenues will be injected into the budget by the end of 2022. So why have they seen a massive drop only recently? Audit Chamber officials linked it to a slump in export tax revenues for oil, gas, and petroleum products and MET revenues by as much as one third. The latter comes from a decline in oil output in line with what Russia had pledged while signing the OPEC+ cut deal. On the whole, the drop in oil and gas revenues to the federal budget is due to the decline in oil prices around the world, a slump in gas exports, as the result of mild weather and a shortfall in

the EU economies, as well as a set of measures to mitigate the coronavirus crisis. Between December 2019 and May 2020, crude oil traded at \$43.1 per barrel, compared to \$65.2 a year before. Back in May, Alexei Kudrin, the head of the Audit Chamber, warned of a shortfall in the state's budget as a result of the coronavirus pandemic with far more modest oil and gas revenues. Even before the outbreak of the pandemic, there had developed a noticeable trend toward a reduced role of hydrocarbons in the global economy.

25 August 2020

EUROPEAN COUNTRIES EXPEL RUSSIAN DIPLOMATS

In just a few days in August, Norway and Slovakia two NATO countries expelled Russian diplomats linked to espionage activities or those who had served as intelligence officers themselves. The latter country asked the Russian diplomatic staff to leave amidst the high-profile murder of a Georgian man of Chechen descent in Berlin back in August 2019.

SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU



Norway has expelled a Russian diplomat linked to the case of a Norwegian national recently arrested on espionage charges. The Norwegian Foreign Ministry summoned the Russian ambassador to notify him that the diplomat had been asked to leave the country because of his actions being not compatible with his role and status as a diplomat. The diplomat in question was in fact an intelligence officer. Just a few days before, Norway's PST intelligence agency had arrested an Indian-born Norwegian national while he was meeting a Russian intelligence officer at an Oslo restaurant. The Norwegian broadcaster NRK identified him as 50-year-old Harsharn Singh Tathgar. During interrogation, the suspect reportedly admitted to handing over information to and receiving money from the Russian diplomat. Though Oslo has not named the diplomat, he is said to have worked in the trade section of the Russian Embassy. Tathgar

used to work as a project manager in the oil and gas department of DNV GL, the Norway-based world's largest classification society that advises the maritime, oil and gas, and renewable energy industries. A few days before, Slovak authorities confirmed that three Russian diplomats were to be expelled from the country as their activities had been in contradiction with the Vienna Convention on diplomatic relations. The reason for the expulsions remains obscure. Many signs are that this was about any activities that allowed a Russian spy involved in the killing of Zelimkhan Khangoshvili, a Georgian citizen of Chechen descent, in Berlin in August 2019, with an abuse of Slovak visas cited as possible reason. Russia has 75 diplomatic and consular staff in Slovakia, which is more than the United States and China. Back in 2018, Slovakia expelled Alexander Vinogradov, Russia's military attaché and an alleged GRU officer.

25 August 2020

THE MOSCOW PATRIARCHATE HAS A PROBLEM IN BELARUS

The ongoing political turmoil in Belarus might bring severe consequences for the country's religious organizations. The largest of them, the Moscow-occupied Belarusian Orthodox Church, was the only one to support Lukashenko and recognize the rigged ballot. Not surprisingly, for the past seven years, the Belarusian Orthodox Church has been headed by an ethnic Russian and Moscow's man in Belarus.

Some hierarchs of the Belarusian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate condemned their Moscow-imposed metropolitan, Pavel, believing him to serve the

interests of Russia, and not Belarus. Among those who spoke against is Archbishop Artemiy of Grodno and Volkovyssk; despite the obedience to the Metropolitan that his position



SOURCE: CHURCH.BY

requires, he denounced Pavel's position both in a statement and in a sermon. Metropolitan Pavel is not a Belarusian citizen as is required by Belarusian law yet now remains in place only because Alexander Lukashenko supports him, much to the dissatisfaction of many. The whole dispute over Pavel, the leader of the Belarusian Orthodox Church since 2013, has blown considerably whilst his dismissal would be a sign of Moscow's weakness. This would now hardly help Lukashenko and the Kremlin. Yet, by allowing Pavel to serve in Belarus, those who stand against Moscow's meddling in the Orthodox church throughout Belarus might incite calls for a new independent Belarusian autocephalous Orthodox church, thus following what Ukraine did in the past. The Belarusian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate was the only one to have welcomed the declared victory of Alexander Lukashenko in the rigged vote in a move that put it on one side of the political spat. If Lukashenko is ousted, its leaders might be in trouble.

The Belarusian Orthodox Church, known under the official name of the Belarusian Exarchate, was created in October 1989, with Philaret, who now serves as the Metropolitan of Minsk and Slutsk, appointed to become its first patriarchal exarch. After he stepped down in 2013, he was replaced by Pavel, the incumbent leader of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, the largest religious organization in the country that has long been a mainstay of Lukashenko's power in Belarus where ties between the state and church are as robust as in Russia. Christianity is the main religion in Belarus, with Orthodoxy being the largest denomination. Like its counterparts elsewhere in the post-Soviet world, the Moscow-dominated Belarusian Orthodox Church has for years been locked in fierce combat against other emigration-based Orthodox churches that are independent of the Moscow Patriarchate like the minor Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox Church.



SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

26 August 2020

LUKASHENKO'S LESSON FOR PUTIN

Vladimir Putin and his aides are keeping an eye on the events in Belarus as Russian officials feel concern over their interests in the neighboring country as well as wonder about political future at home. Lukashenko's current headache might be a lesson for Vladimir Putin.

The Belarusian dictator made a dreadful mistake, allowing independent candidates to run for office. Probably he thought a staged election campaign and his victory over a real candidate would boost his ranks in the West in what could furnish him a tool to reinforce his position in ties with Moscow. With how the events played out, he lost much in the

East whilst winning nothing in the West. Lukashenko seems to have much centered on geopolitics, thus neglecting Belarusian society. He could have believed in his propaganda messages, thinking many Belarusians would not vote for Tikhonovskaya whilst public protests with no leaders would not be as powerful. In Russia, Khabarovsk protesters

voiced support for the opposition in Belarus just a couple of days of rallies. Also, some in Minsk were carrying slogans in support with the Far East protests. Yet this might bother the Kremlin as the Belarusian uprising is not particularly anti-Russian or even anti-Putin, but they might morph into such, posing a grave threat to Moscow's interest in Belarus. Both have something in common: they voice antipathy towards two dictators: Lukashenko in Belarus and Putin in Russia. But Minsk and Khabarovsk residents share something more. At the sunset of tsarist Russia, land hunger led hundreds of thousands of Belarusians to leave their native land. Most fled to the United States just like many Poles and Ukrainians. Yet tens of thousands found home in Siberia and the Far East. The second wave of migration coincided with the first decade of Bolshevik power when more than 30,000 Belarusians voluntarily went to the Far East, including to the Khabarovsk

region. For Putin, there is just one conclusion. With the next presidential election due in 2024, those who run for president must be just sham candidates, and not independent nominees. Indeed, the Russian leader drew conclusions quickly and rolled out a set of preventive solutions. Navalny was the most natural and serious challenger that Putin had faced. Earlier the opposition figure had been barred from running for office because of a conviction in an alleged fraud case. But this time the chekists hit harder, making a display of strength and ruthlessness. Navalny's poisoning serves as a warning for any politician or activist: it is better not to dare to even try to challenge Vladimir Putin. Why such a cruel effort to eliminate Navalny? Apparently Putin has taken a lesson from Lukashenko's turmoil at home as the arrest of Tikhonovsky and Babariko, as well as the fleeing of Tsepikalo, did not head off the catastrophe.

26 August 2020

TURKEY IMPORTS LESS GAS FROM RUSSIA

Turkey buys more Azeri gas and liquefied natural gas whilst its gas imports from Russia are in decline. Ankara has just declared it would soon become self-sufficient in energy resources with its new sizeable gas deposits discovered off the Black and Mediterranean Sea. Yet these ambitions are shaky for political reasons while the country's pursuit toward energy independence will take some time. Turkey, meanwhile, is making efforts to diversify its energy supplier portfolio, with a number of its political allies involved.

Between January and June 2020, Turkey imported 46 percent less gas from Iran year-on-year. Likewise, imports from Russia fell by 41.5 percent in the January-June period of this year relative to the same period last year.

Also, there is a clear upward trend in Turkey's liquefied natural gas imports, according to data compiled by the country's Energy Market Regulatory Authority (EPDK). Throughout the first half of 2020, Turkey's total gas imports

27 August 2020

RUSSIA INTERFERES IN GEORGIA POLLS

A parliamentary poll in Georgia is due for October 2020 and thus many signs are that Russia will make efforts to place its bets on the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, a radical pro-Russian party. Its political feats come in handy for Georgian Dream, the country's governing party that depicts itself as a moderate and pro-Western group especially if contrasted with the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia. Yet it follows a policy that fits Moscow, often sparking outrage in the West.

Dossier Center, a Russian investigative project established by the Kremlin critic, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, released a report, offering a comprehensive insight into Russia's backing of the Georgian nativist party. The group quoted some documents from the secretary of the Russian SVR General Vladimir

Chernov, who heads the president's department for interregional and cultural relations with foreign countries. The department is in fact tasked with counteracting what is known as "color revolutions" in the post-Soviet world. Chernov is a close associate of Sergey Ivanov, Putin's former chief of staff. The Alliance of

SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



Patriots of Georgia allegedly hired political strategist Sergey Mikheev and the Moscow company Politsecrets to promote the party. Mikheev, the report said, is supervised by Chernov's direct subordinates – FSB Colonel Valery Maksimov and GRU officer Valery Chernychov. A list of Russian aid for the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia includes campaign funding, too. Also, Moscow has mobilized its media agencies, including Sputnik and Regnum, to provide the party with information support.

Members of the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia openly reprimand Georgia's state authorities whilst in their policy they seek to cut ties with NATO and the United States and to normalize those with Russia. In 2019, Irma Inashvili, the

chairwoman of the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, demanded that all U.S. diplomats and experts who had delivered speeches at the John McCain Institute's conference in Tbilisi be declared personae non gratae in Georgia. The party was founded in 2012 by her and Davit Tarkhan-Mouravi. In the 2016 poll, it won six seats in Georgia's 150-seat parliament. Chaired by Nino Burjanadze, Democratic Movement – United Georgia is yet another Russian-backed political party in Georgia, but failed to enter the parliament. According to the July polls, openly pro-Russian groups might secure between 1 and 3 percent of ballots. Georgian Dream is now the frontrunner after having fought an efficient battle against the coronavirus pandemic.

28 August 2020

PUTIN THREATENS HE COULD SEND MILITARY SUPPORT TO BELARUS

What Vladimir Putin said about deploying “a law enforcement reserve assistance” to Belarus to help Alexander Lukashenko is nothing but part of a psychological game that both Minsk and Moscow are playing up against the West. This is yet another time when Russia makes threat of a “second Donbas” to discourage the EU and the United States to put more pressure on the regime in Minsk. Yet a Russian military intervention is somewhat unlikely. Something else is far more important than that: this is the first time the Kremlin has ever publicly reserved the right to intervene in a neighboring country whilst overtly declaring support for one of the sides to an internal political conflict.

Speaking on Russian state TV Rossiya on August 27, Russian President Vladimir Putin said Alexander Lukashenko had asked him to set up “a certain police reserve that might be

dispatched to Belarus if necessary.” He said the new reserve force would not go into Belarus unless “extremist elements using political slogans as cover cross a certain boundary and



SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

start setting fire to cars and houses, or try to seize government buildings.” “We are behaving much more restrained and neutral in relation to the events in Belarus than many other countries, both Europeans and Americans,” he was quoted as saying. Yet Putin added Russia had an obligation to help Belarus with its security under what he named as “the two countries’ close alliance”, stressing “the deep cultural, ethnic and linguistic ties between the two nations.” Putin publicly reiterates that Russia sees Belarus as part of its sphere of influence, an element of what is known as *Russkiy mir*, or the Russian world. The Russian leader also discussed a constitutional reform as suggested by Lukashenko. Of course, he took the role of a natural mediator though Moscow denies having contact with the opposition. According to Putin, a political solution of the crisis may involve a dialogue between a group of regime representatives and “moderate” opposition members, followed

by a long-term process of systemic changes leading to constitutional updates, and possibly also the maintaining the status quo. Later that day, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and his Belarusian counterpart Vladimir Makei emphasized in a phone call that Belarus “did not require foreign interference in its political processes, attempts to destabilize the whole situation or unilateral mediation bids as imposed from the outside,” thus criticizing what the European Union, the United States, and some EU nations, including Poland and Lithuania, have done so far. On August 28, Belarus has kicked off three-day military drills. Not incidentally, in its statement, Belarus’s defense ministry added the drills would take place in the Grodno area in western Belarus. A day before, Lukashenko again accused Poland of pushing territorial claims, saying Poland might annex the Grodno region if the situation in the country deteriorates further and Belarus disintegrates.



SOURCE: MIL.BY

29 August 2020

BELARUS STARTS MILITARY DRILLS, LUKASHENKO THREATENS NATO WITH RUSSIA

Belarus started on Friday, August 28, three-day military drills in the western region of Grodno. On the same day, Alexander Lukashenko warned North Atlantic Alliance states that both Minsk and Moscow will be ready to pacify adversary. This confirms that Belarus is part of the Russian military theater. Even if there are now no Russian tanks waiting on the country's borders with Poland and Lithuania, it serves as an actual borderline between Russia and NATO countries.

The Belarusian defense ministry stated that Belarus would hold tactical drills in the western Grodno region, right off its border with Poland, after Lukashenko had ordered to beef up the military there amidst a plausible intervention from NATO states, including Poland and Lithuania. The Belarusian dictator on Friday, August 28, said

Belarus and Russia would use a joint group of armed forces if Western forces attacked the country's border. What might pose a threat, according to Lukashenko, are U.S. F-16 jets to be moved to Poland from Germany. Held between August 28 and August 31, Belarus's war games are conducted by the Western Operational Command. Helicopters will

redeploy from the Machulishchi airfield to Lida in the Grodno region to provide support for the troops' operations. Viktor Khrenin, who serves as the country's defense minister, issued an order on August 19 to beef up the grouping of forces in the Grodno area with the Tochka and Polonez battalions of tactical missiles, a squad of drones, and air defense systems. At a Security Council meeting sometime earlier, Alexander Lukashenko had instructed the defense ministry to closely follow NATO forces' movements in Poland and Lithuania. Just four days later, General Viktor Khrenin

told Lukashenko that "external forces might use the country's destabilization as a pretext for a violent change of power in Belarus." The defense minister warned of a possible NATO attack from the Polish territory. The Belarusian army is in fact part of the Russian military potential, with a joint grouping of forces, a unified air defense system, and a raft of military drills between the two armies. Belarusian army officers study at Russian universities. Under a military cooperation deal, Moscow is allowed to send its armed forces to Belarus for both drills and in case of any emergencies.

29 August 2020

RUSSIAN PROBLEMS IN SYRIA

Russia's military presence on the mostly-Kurdish and U.S.-backed eastern side of the Euphrates river in northeastern Syria entails a grave risk, as evidenced by a recent collision between American and Russian armored vehicles in eastern Syria and the killing of a Russian general in jihadi ambush.

SOURCE: SYRIA.MIL.RU



A Russian military vehicle was attacked on August 25 during a joint Russian-Turkish patrol in Syria's Idlib region, injuring two servicemen. The incident occurred along the M4 highway linking Syria's east and west. A similar attack against the joint patrol happened on August 17, also along the M4 motorway. The Russian military, however, is in far bigger trouble elsewhere in Syria. Russian service members marched east of the Euphrates river after U.S. President Donald Trump had ordered to withdraw troops from the area in October 2019, shortly before a Turkish offensive. About 500 U.S. service members are still in northeastern Syria; both armies sometimes get embroiled in some incidents. Several American troops were injured on August 25 during an altercation with a Russian military convoy near Dayrick, Syria. Spokespeople of both the Pentagon and U.S. Central Command, or CENTCOM, slammed Russia for aggressive behavior that injured U.S. troops. Though back in 2019, the United States and Russia agreed to cooperate within what

they named as a deconfliction zone to avoid extra tensions, some incidents occur from time to time between the two armies. Just a week before, an improvised roadside bomb had exploded 15 km from the city of Deir ez-Zor when a Russian military convoy was returning to its base after a humanitarian mission. Three Russian servicemen were wounded in the blast while one of them died. He was identified as Major General Vyacheslav Gladkikh, the deputy commander of the 36th Combined Arms Army and the first Russian general killed in Syria since 2017. A commander of the local pro-regime National Defense Forces is also believed to have been killed in the attack. A group of jihadi militants are thought to have planted the bomb, according to reports. There are still many IS insurgents occupying the desert area both south and east of Deir ez-Zor on the al Assad-controlled western side of the Euphrates river, who attack regime-affiliated service members.

30 August 2020

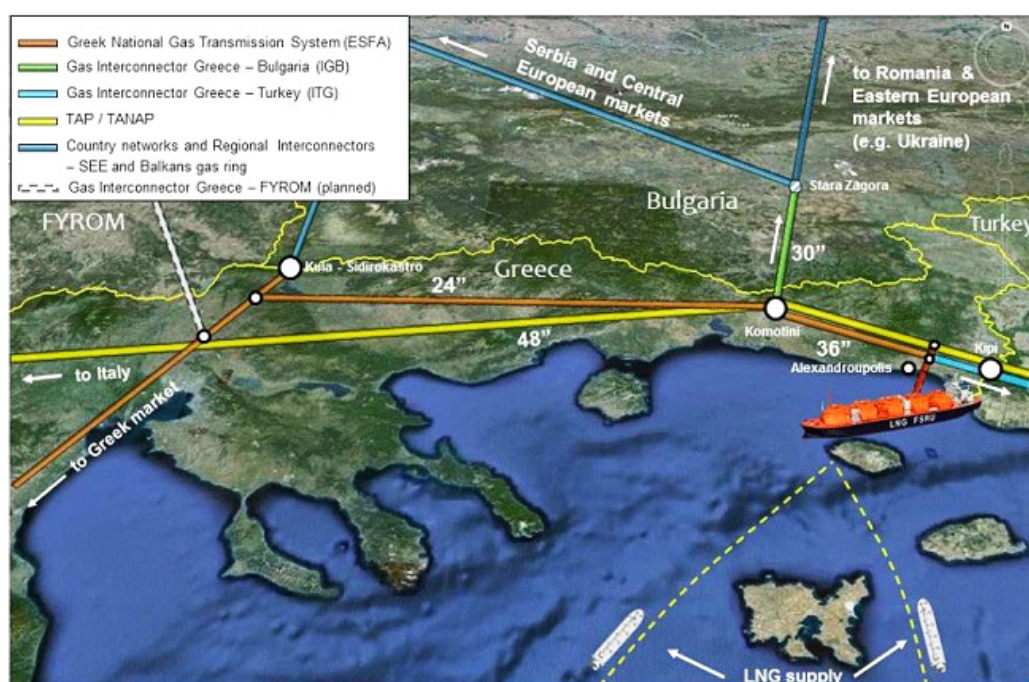
BULGARIA BUYS MORE LNG, GAZPROM WILL LOSE SALES MARKET

In line with earlier declarations, Bulgaria bought stakes in a liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal project in Alexandroupolis, Greece. Prime Minister Boyko Borisov's government is following the diversification policy for the country's gas supplies, aspiring to make Bulgaria a regionwide gas hub for commodities flowing from Russia and Azerbaijan, as well as U.S. and Qatari liquefied natural gas supplies. This is somewhat uneasy for Gazprom the Russian energy major that is facing fierce competition in southeastern Europe.

Bulgaria and Greece signed on August 24 a deal on the acquisition of 20 percent interest in a floating liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal off Greece's northern coastal city of Alexandroupolis by the Aegean Sea. According to unofficial reports, Sofia is ready to invest some €30 million in the project. The Bulgarian government decided to purchase a package of stakes two years ago but it is only now that it closed the deal. A signing ceremony was attended by Bulgarian Prime Minister Book Borisov and his Greek counterpart

floating terminal will be linked to the Greek gas transmission system via a 28-kilometer pipeline. The terminal is set to become operational in late 2022 or early 2023, allowing Bulgaria to gradually give up purchasing Russian-sourced gas. Sofia started buying less gas from Russia after it had kicked off LNG imports from the first terminal in Greece (0.5 bcm in 2019). The construction of the Komotini-Stara Zagora gas interconnector is moving fast. It will receive gas supplies flowing from the Alexandroupolis terminal, with a projected capacity of 3 bcm per

year, up to 5.5 bcm ultimately. Once the gas connector and terminal in Alexandroupolis are completed, Bulgaria will be able to receive liquefied natural gas from Qatar, Israel, and the United States via this route. Earlier Russia had reprimanded Sofia over its alleged delaying the building of the Balkan Stream, or a TurkStream natural gas pipeline



SOURCE: GASTRADE.GR

Kyriakos Mitsotakis.

The LNG terminal project is currently under development by Greek utility Gastrade. Borisov stressed that the new investment was vital for his country's energy diversification efforts. The Alexandroupolis project will be the second LNG terminal in the region. Greece's only current LNG terminal – to which Bulgaria already has access to – is at Revithoussa, west of the Greek capital of Athens. The LNG terminal, which will have an estimated annual capacity of about 6.1 billion cubic meters (bcm), will be built 18 kilometers southwest of the port of Alexandroupolis. The station will have an LNG storage capacity of 170,000 cubic meters. A

on its territory. The Bulgarian section of the Balkan Stream was initially poised to be ready in early 2020 yet Bulgaria had a delay and now says this would be finished by the end of this year. Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov on July 29 informed about the progress in the construction of the pipeline that would be completed as expected. The 470-kilometer Balkan Stream is poised to be an extension of the two strings of the TurkStream pipeline, each capable of delivering 15.75 bcm of gas from Russia to the European part of Turkey alongside the 900-kilometer Russia-to-Turkey Blue Stream energy line beneath the Black Sea.

30 August 2020

MOSCOW APPOINTS NEW HEAD OF BELARUSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

The latest reshuffle in the Belarusian Orthodox Church is seemingly a concession that Moscow and Alexander Lukashenko both made by replacing an ethnic Russian with a Belarusian national. The new leader of the Orthodox Church is a safe bet for the country's authorities in the whole turmoil Belarus has plunged recently.

Bishop of Borisov and Maryina Horka Veniamin has been appointed the new exarch of Belarus, and Metropolitan of Minsk and Zaslavl. At a Moscow meeting on August 25, the Holy Synod of the Patriarchate of Moscow decided to dismiss Metropolitan Pavel, the Patriarchal Exarch in Minsk, transferring him to Kuban in southern Russia. Thus the Synod accepted Pavel's alleged request to be relieved of his post. He served as Metropolitan of Minsk and Zaslavl since December 2013. The previous metropolitan of Kuban, Isidor, died on August 8 of complications from Covid-19, the illness caused by the new coronavirus. Pavel came under fire after he had congratulated Alexander Lukashenko upon his reelection on August 9 and amid his failing to react to the mass arrests and beatings of protesters during demonstrations against the vote tally. These allegations are yet not fully justified. On August 18, Pavel visited injured protesters

treated in a Minsk hospital. He reiterated that the Orthodox Church did not meddle in the country's political life and condemned violence. He also provided the victims with humanitarian assistance. Also, Metropolitan Pavel had asked forgiveness for sending Lukashenko what he named as premature congratulations. Veniamin was born in 1968 in the Brest region as Vital Tupeka. He first graduated from the Faculty of Radiophysics at Belarusian State University, and then also from the Theological Seminary and the Theological Academy, both in Minsk. In 2010 he was ordained as Bishop of Barysau. Metropolitan Veniamin is just 51 years old. Unlike his predecessor, he is an ethnic Belarusian. Moreover, he is seen as a proponent of Yoan, or Ivan Maslov, an Orthodox monk who founded a stringent, ascetic, and somewhat mystical current in the Orthodox church. For Lukashenko, he might be somewhat comfortable Metropolitan Veniamin does not



SOURCE: CHURCH.BY

meddle into politics nor he publicly speaks up on anything but religious matters. His designating is good news for Russia, too. Shortly before assuming a new office, he pledged loyalty to the patriarch of Moscow in an interview. He is convinced that autocephaly is a sin, which is what Moscow started to fear. Thus it ousted the controversial bishop that came under criticism from Belarusian clergymen. Some of the faithful warmly welcomed the appointing of a native Belarusian yet this is by no means tantamount to his being independent of Moscow, but seek

to pacify opposition moods throughout the Orthodox clergymen. Critical of Pavel's feats, Archbishop Artemiy of Grodno supported anti-government rallies, and so did many younger-generation Orthodox priests. Yet within the Belarusian Orthodox Church there are also those in favor of Russia and the incumbent regime. Metropolitan Pavel was somewhat weaving between the two camps. Veniamin will be keener to follow the orders from his superiors, thus the patriarch of Moscow and the president of Belarus.



31 August 2020

PUTIN USES BIRTHDAY PHONE CALL TO INVITE LUKASHENKO TO MOSCOW



SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

During yet another record-breaking anti-government rally in Belarus, the Kremlin reiterated its full support for Alexander Lukashenko. Russian President Vladimir Putin made a phone call to Minsk as the Belarusian president turned 66. According to a statement posted on the official Kremlin website, they have agreed

on “further strengthening relations” between their nations. Putin invited Lukashenko to visit Moscow soon, too. His trip may mean new deals poised to deepen Minsk’s reliance on Russia a price Lukashenko must pay for Moscow’s support.

Whilst anti-government rallies seemed to have somewhat faded over time, some 200,000 people on Sunday, August 30, took to the streets of Minsk, the country’s capital. They marched for about four hours. A group of protesters moved towards Lukashenko’s residence at the Independence Palace, which was heavily protected by riot police. It was only after that anti-government protesters dispersed peacefully. As the rally started, helmeted security forces detained some whilst trying to contain the manifestation. For their participation in the pro-democracy protest, 125 people were arrested within the first two hours, the country’s interior ministry informed. The Sunday protest was essential, showing Lukashenko, Moscow, and the whole world that those who stand against the regime have a great ability to mobilize despite a recent wave of repression. On the same day, in a phone call, Putin passed on his regards on Lukashenko’s 66th birthday. Both presidents agreed to meet in Moscow in the not-too-distant future. During a phone conversation, Putin and Lukashenko reaffirmed their common position to further strengthen the Russian-Belarusian alliance and expand mutually beneficial cooperation, the Kremlin press service said in a statement. This marks another call between the two leaders in recent weeks. The Russian president on Saturday, August 29, said Russia had recognized the August 9 poll as legitimate. In a televised interview, Putin argued that many signs were that the West had already decided before the poll not to accept them as valid.

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The Warsaw Institute Foundation
Wilcza 9 St., 00-538 Warsaw, Poland
+48 22 417 63 15
office@warsawinstitute.org
